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Modes of Interaction and Social Glue. A commentary on *Three Wishes for the World* by Harvey Whitehouse

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Whitehouse convincingly argues for a distinction between two kinds of social glue – identity fusion and social identification. In his earlier work he related these to two memory systems, semantic and episodic (Whitehouse 2000). Here I take a different tack by briefly reviewing two modes of social interaction familiar to linguists and sociologists – the informal (or intimate) and the formal — and considering how they may be major ingredients in the two kinds of glue.

Two modes of interaction. Many languages distinguish between informal and formal in their second person pronouns. In contrast to the basic, unmarked, informal “you,” the formal “you” may treat the individual and his social role as separate personalities, addressing the listener as a plurality — the French polite vous (you plural) — or in the third person — the German Sie or Italian lei (she). The informal/formal distinction may also show up as a difference in address – “Lizzie” or “dude” versus “Miss Bennett,” “Your Excellency,” “Your Holiness,” or “Professor.” The same distinction is evident in different strategies for making polite requests. Positive politeness makes a claim to intimacy (“Brother, can you spare a dime?”), negative politeness shows deference (“Sir, might I trouble you ...?”) (Brown and Levinson 1987, Pinker 2007). The contrast also extends to clothing, comportment, and other social interactions outside language, with the formal mode in each case being more heavily scripted and allowing less room for improvisation.

Consider in more detail what intimacy involves. Intimacy among humans presumably has some of the same neurohormonal bases as bonding in other species. But there also seems to be a uniquely human cognitive side to intimate I-thou interactions, involving the effort to establish shared intentions (Tomasello et. al. 2005). This has been long studied in the field of linguistic pragmatics (Pinker 2007). By way of illustration: suppose Fred and Wendy Smith are a couple we know, and I tell you, “I saw Wendy kissing a man in the park yesterday.” You are likely to infer that the man was not Fred. Why? I could just as easily have said, “I saw Wendy kissing Fred in the park yesterday.” Since I didn’t, presumably I meant to imply that the man wasn’t Fred. This conclusion is not a logical deduction but a pragmatic inference, where you infer meanings that I encourage you to infer. Pragmatic inference, and shared intentions in general, depend on common

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knowledge (a term of art from game theory: not just what we both know, but what we both know we both know). Our common knowledge in this case includes our particular knowledge of Fred and Wendy, and our general knowledge of the maxim that a cooperative speaker tries to supply as much relevant information as possible, other things being equal. Similar reasoning leads you to conclude that when I say something we know in common to be literally untrue (“What wonderful weather for a picnic,” or “Death is the mother of beauty”) I am speaking ironically or metaphorically.

Formal interactions may involve pragmatic inference as well, but they involve more centrally another uniquely human specialization, that of treating other people as occupants of social roles, apart from their personal qualities (Bloch 2008). This dramaturgic faculty depends not so much on developing shared intentions through one-off improvisation, as on following conventionalized interactional scripts, including sheer rote, as in the army, where “We salute the uniform, not the man.”

Two kinds of glue. I suggest that in rituals involving identity fusion and social identification, the psychologies of informal and formal interactions, respectively, are activated, although these psychologies are also active in many non-ritual exchanges. Consider identity fusion rituals. While most or (by definition?) all rituals involve some degree of formalization, this class of ritual seem less concerned with getting the ritual exactly right or exactly the same as last time, and more concerned with changing participants for life – not just gluing them together, but melting them down and reforging them. To some extent, identity fusion rituals achieve this result through pain, ecstasy, and other high arousal states. But there is also a cognitive side to these rituals, which (I suggest) comes from their activating a process of pragmatic inference. As Whitehouse notes “a car crash or even a traumatic experience on the battlefield [may] provoke a rather limited array of reflections.” I suggest that identity fusion rituals are different from crashes and war trauma because they are understood as symbolic acts aimed at generating shared intentions. The intended meanings behind ritual symbolism may be obscure, triggering a lasting open-ended process of rumination. (“We have always fought wild pigs. But the initiator said that we initiates are wild pigs who must be killed. He couldn’t have meant it literally, so maybe he meant ... or maybe ...”) The episodic memory of shared extreme experiences and the ongoing pondering of “What did he mean by that?” seem to intensify social cohesion. While intense, intimate bonds develop without rituals sometimes – between mother and child for example – with identity fusion rituals they can extend further.

Social identity rituals, by contrast, involve more scripted behavior, and the significance of this behavior is more likely to be spelled out, rather than left open to pragmatic inference, as we would expect for formal social interactions.

How does this contribute to understanding the social evolution of ritual? As Whitehouse notes, although fusion is sometimes extended to very large impersonal groups, the tendency is to shift to social identity rituals in the doctrinal mode as societies grow more complex. Why is this? Why is the routinization of charisma the rule in large-scale societies? The evidence from linguistics and related areas suggests one possible partial answer: the formal mode is employed not just in interactions with socially distant individuals (where formality is expected on both sides), but in interactions with one's superiors (who are not obliged to be formal in return; they may answer your *vous* with a *tu*.) It may be, then, that social identity rituals are more compatible with the social stratification found in complex societies. By contrast, identity fusion rituals make for more social solidarity, but they also threaten to melt down hierarchies (Ehrenreich 2007). Attempts at extended fusion – as, for example, in messianic and millenarian movements — are likely to be regarded with suspicion by the powers that be, unless they are directed outward against external enemies, or diverted into harmless channels, like Saturnalia or Carnival.

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